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# 'Something is recognised': A liberal Protestant reflection on Erik Borgman's cultural theology

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The Dutch Roman Catholic theologian Erik Borgman (1957), who developed a cultural theology, was appointed as a visiting professor at the liberal Protestant theological Mennonite Seminary in Amsterdam. In this article, his progressive Roman Catholic theology is compared to a liberal Protestant approach. The historical backgrounds of these different types of theology are expounded, all the way back to Aquinas and Scotus, in order to clarify their specific character for the sake of a better mutual understanding. Next, the convergence of these two types of theology in the twentieth century is explained with reference to the philosophy of Heidegger. Finally, the difficulties posed by postmodern philosophies to both a progressive Roman Catholic theology and a liberal Protestant theology are shown. It is asserted that both types of theology claim that the insights of their particular tradition can be relevant beyond this tradition to modern and postmodern humans.

A conference was held on 16 October 2015 on the occasion of the joining of Erik Borgman as a visiting professor at the Mennonite Seminary (*doopsgezind seminarie*) in Amsterdam.<sup>1</sup> Borgman (1957), the biographer of the famous theologian Edward Schillebeeckx (Borgman 2002), is a prominent Dutch theologian, who was estimated to be one of the most perceptive intellectuals by the *Vrij Nederland* magazine in 2008. His appointment at the Mennonite Seminary, which adheres to a liberal (*vrijzinnige*) theology, was remarkable because Borgman confessed himself to be a Roman Catholic theologian critical of theological liberalism. He measured a liberal theology as subjective and individualistic with no strings attached and therefore labelled himself a 'liberal orthodox' at the most. Despite his criticism, he admitted that liberals were important to break an orthodox mastery of the truth and to bring the Christian faith more up to date. His appointment posed a threefold challenge to me: firstly, to articulate the basics of a liberal theology as they have been developed in the history of Dutch theology; secondly, to look at the differences between a liberal Protestant perspective and a Roman Catholic one as expressed by Borgman; thirdly, to face the problems that arise from a postmodern point of view to both a liberal Protestant theology and a progressive Roman Catholic theology. In this article I intend to address these themes, which of course will require a broad and general outline of various and different positions. Such an approach can be justified on account of the clarification it may offer of the presuppositions and assumptions often taken for granted without being noticed or discussed in theological conversations. It seems to me that a clarification of various theological approaches, schools or styles will make sense to everyone, even though it will inevitably contain general and commonplace statements.

## Liberal theology

The sources of liberal theological thought in the Netherlands go back to the second half of the nineteenth century, when critical investigations were inaugurated and integrated into theological studies at universities, especially the University of Leiden, by prominent theologians like J.H. Scholten, C.W. Opzoomer, C.P. Tiele and A. Kuenen. Their lasting heritage contains at least three important insights. Firstly, the Bible is a collection of books that can and should be studied in a historical-critical way, which implies that the Bible as such is the work of human beings. Secondly, Christian doctrines are articulated in the course of human history and formulated under the conditions of specific circumstances and do not, therefore, express eternal truths. Thirdly, Christianity should be considered as a member of the family of religions and as a part of their historical development. As a result, Christianity should not be opposed to alternative and consequently 'false' religions (Benjamins 2008:15–82; Van Driel 2007:9–12).

1. This article is an elaboration of my contribution to the conference.

These insights implied a serious transformation of Protestant orthodoxy, which means, of course, the orthodoxy at that time, as orthodoxy developed slowly and gradually as well and came to incorporate many of the liberal insights, albeit never wholeheartedly, under the influence of scholarly expertise (Becking 2011:4). Orthodox theologians held on to the Bible as the Word of God, considered doctrine as the adequate expression of the biblical message and conceived of revelation in an exclusively Christian way. The conflict between liberal, scholarly insights and orthodox conceptions was very well pointed out by Ernst Troeltsch, who belonged to the next generation of liberal theologians, in his famous article *Über historische und dogmatische Methode der Theologie* (Troeltsch 1900:2–25).

Obviously, a liberal theology could not be satisfied with the sole results of its own scholarly work, which were only critical. Liberal theologians were required to look for some new foundation of the religious life that was precious to them. Kant, Schleiermacher and Hegel, or more broadly the philosophy of German idealism, seemed to offer appropriate terms of reference for this task and are considered as foundational for modern Christianity up until now (Dorien 2012:1–3; Hodgson 2005:v, 247–284). Kant argued that human beings have to act in a world of which they only have limited and conditional knowledge. Once they act, however, they must do so under the unconditional obligation of their own conscience to act morally well. This obligation represents, in a way, the inner voice of God that sounds within humans' spirit and connects them practically with an ultimate reality of which theoretically no knowledge can be obtained. Schleiermacher argued that human beings can connect with the universe of which they are part without having established themselves as such, which gives rise to their feeling of absolute dependency. 'God' is the symbol that refers to the Where-From of the feeling of absolute dependency, of whom humans can say nothing as such, but only speak on the basis of their immanent awareness. Hegel reasoned about the identity of the human spirit with the divine Spirit in a very complicated way. The common thread that links their thoughts is the notion that humans can obtain knowledge of nature and the world, but not of God. Humans who restrict themselves to ascertained scientific knowledge of nature and the world for this reason, however, actually cut their humanity in half, because humans are not only cognisant beings, but also have to act, can feel and include spirit beyond reason. In these respects, they can be related to God if they obey their inner obligation, connect with the world in dependency of God or widen human knowledge to include a veritable reasonableness.

Along these tracks liberal theologies were developed, which constantly placed great emphasis on the life of faith of the individual person. The sources of religion and of the religious life are to be found in the interior of the human spirit (as inner voice of conscience, awareness of dependence or spirit related to Spirit). Neither church nor institution, nor Scripture nor tradition is ultimately authoritative, but the spirit in

human beings makes them religious and demands their full respect. The world, history and religious texts are open to scientific and unbiased investigations, which will dissolve many indefensible religious opinions, but the human spirit and its pre-given structure and capacities still allow for a religious view of life and spirit. In this way, the aforementioned Troeltsch (1907:126–128, 163–165) faced the inherent ambiguities of the modern world with its opposed tendencies towards both emancipation and loss of meaning. He considered that the modern world is more or less defined by its crisis of religion, and he tried to overcome this crisis by a 'cultural synthesis' based on the religious-metaphysical idea of freedom and personality; this idea should ultimately be grounded in faith in God as the power 'from where freedom and personality are transmitted to us' (Troeltsch 1911:182). Likewise the influential Dutch liberal theologian K.H. Roessingh argued that at a certain point in life, humans can no longer build on the insights of reason alone, or the efforts of their will, but have to trust the spontaneous, inscrutable being of their personalities and the mystical voice of their intuition, which make them trust in God (Roessingh 1918:69). Essential to these liberal convictions is the belief that God is not opposed to human beings, but is working through them. The divine commandment is not externally imposed on human beings from the outside, but constitutes a commission that can be affirmed from within. The Word of God is not external but rings within our personality, without being ours to such an extent that it originates from us and can be controlled by our autonomy. Our spirit is, as it was, pre-given and beyond our reach and therefore contains more than what is only ours because it contains what is 'transmitted to us', which makes us both responsible and confident.

It seems to me that these liberal theological notions are not just subjective or individualistic without obligation but, on the contrary, reflect serious attempts to overcome the modern problems of subjectivism and individualism while affirming the achievements of modernity and the inalienable value of the person.

## Liberal theology as a Protestant theology

The liberal theological approach is unmistakably determined by its protestant origin, as is clearly shown by its common designation 'neo-Protestantism'. Essential to protestant theology was its focus and concentration on the Bible. God comes to us and reveals himself through the words and the narratives of biblical scriptures. As a matter of principle, this focus was coupled with a non-philosophical or even anti-metaphysical attitude. Protestantism displaced scholastic theology and emancipated itself from philosophy, especially Aristotelianism, in order to be dedicated to the scriptures alone, in which God addresses us. In the first book of the *Institutes*, Calvin, for example, defends the sufficiency of Scripture. Scripture is sufficient without the authority of tradition and philosophy in regard to what we believe for the sake of our salvation and consequently needs no further

speculation. It is also sufficient as it proves its own truth by the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit. 'Let it therefore be held as fixed that those who are inwardly taught by the Holy Spirit acquiesce implicitly in Scripture; that Scripture carrying its own evidence along with it deigns not to submit to proofs and arguments, but owes the full conviction with which we ought to receive it to the testimony of the Spirit. Enlightened by him, we no longer believe, either on our own judgment or that of others, that the Scriptures are from God' (Calvin 1559:I.7.5).

In liberal Protestant theology the external authority of the Bible was denied, but the internal witness of the Spirit was emphasised. The testimony of the Spirit was no longer related to Scripture as an integral whole, but to the scriptural witness of Christ. J.H. Scholten, for example, stated that we can receive and appropriate the scriptural witness of Christ to such an extent that the light of Christ dwells in us as a new principle of life. In that case, we see God spiritually and hear his voice inwardly, just like Jesus did so that we are related to God by the inner light of Christ. Scholten identified the inner light with the witness of the Spirit and defined it as the 'witness of the human mind itself, of reason and consciousness, which can be developed and purged in community with Christ and become utterances of the Holy Spirit' (Scholten 1870:202). As soon as our inner light is lit, we hear the voice of God in our own mind and from then onwards a reliance on the external authority of ancient books would only signify a relapse. The inner testimony of the Holy Spirit is initiated by the scriptural witness of Christ and concords with human reason, but is detached from philosophical arguments and insights.

Even though Protestant theologies relied on the Bible, philosophical and metaphysical notions were never remote. A Protestant scholasticism was developed soon after the Reformation, which is illustrated in an exemplary fashion by the *Synopsis Purioris Theologiae* from 1625 A.D., a scholastic and dogmatic treatise composed by professors in Leiden (Te Velde 2014). Likewise, liberal theological neo-Protestantism implicitly depended upon a metaphysics of spirit. Up until today, Protestant theology is explicitly focused on the biblical narrative, but often adopts strong metaphysical claims, albeit sometimes tacitly. On the basis of biblical narrative, God is frequently represented as a person-like being outside and above the world, able to intervene in the course of things in order to conduct human beings towards their final destination. Recently, the prominent Dutch Reverend Carel Ter Linden (2013) caused a sensation when he confessed his faith in the value of Scripture, but admitted his growing sense of doubt about a supernatural God, whom he ultimately denied. He demonstrated his own embarrassment in the title of his book *What am I doing here for God's sake?* Apparently, biblical narrative and strong metaphysical conceptions are closely knit together in mainline Protestantism, and it seems hard to untie them.

Protestant theologies never got rid of metaphysical conceptions - which may be inevitable anyway - because the main character of biblical narrative was attributed an

ontological status that was deemed necessary. The God who is named in biblical texts had to exist and was conceived of as an actor among other actors, albeit a supreme actor beyond them. In metaphysical terms, the conception amounts to the idea that God exists as a part of a being, like other beings, at the same level of being, even though he is more powerful than other beings and therefore able to guide or dominate them. According to broadly shared views - and sharply opposed valuations - the roots of this metaphysical conception go back to Duns Scotus. Scotus introduced an ontology of univocity, which implies that all beings (including both God and all humans) are individual substances that share the same sort of univocal being. The Dutch scholar Antoon Vos highly appreciated Scotus' philosophy for its consequence, namely that freedom and will are essential characteristics of human beings that cannot be denied (Vos, 2005:83-97). Because human beings are stand-alone beings like God in the realm of univocal being, the concept of free persons could arise. On the other hand, the Thomistic tradition blamed Scotus for conceiving of God and humans as competitive beings within the same space of being (Obermann 1963:1). The philosophy of Scotus was therefore held to enhance secularism because it lacks an inherent relation between God and the being of beings, who might as well exist without him (Milbank 1990:1-6, 302-303). Either way, Scotus opposed the traditional idea, expressed by Thomas Aquinas among others, that beings exist because they participate in the being of a personal creator. According to this conceptualisation, God is not an object among other objects at the same level of univocal beings, but He is the source of being, which means that God is an ontological base for the existence of all beings, in which they all participate to the extent that they are or exist.

## Aquinas and Roman Catholic theology

It is not my aim to elaborate on the differences between Scotus and Aquinas. Rather, their philosophies represent a distinction that structurally determines Protestant and Roman Catholic theologies and consequently also characterises the differences between a liberal theological neo-Protestant approach and a progressive Roman Catholic theology as it is developed by Erik Borgman. A liberal theology stresses the life of faith of the individual person, finds its sources in the interior of the human spirit and emanated from the Protestant tradition. Protestant theology originally intended to base itself on Scripture alone, yet typically conceived of God as a being beyond other beings within the sphere of commonly shared being. In this respect, Protestant theologies are indebted to Duns Scotus. The theology of Borgman, on the other hand, belongs to a tradition that is especially influenced by Thomas Aquinas. My point is that Aquinas' conception of God and His relation to the world stamps the theological approach of Borgman, which is rather foreign to accustomed Protestant ways of thought but may be very useful and fertile nevertheless. It will be so even more if we are aware of its distinctive character.



In Thomistic theology, God is described as *ipsum esse subsistens* (*Summa Theologiae* I, q.4, a.2). In this single phrase a very complicated philosophical theology is summarised (Te Velde 1995:119–125). However, I will confine myself to a succinct and concentrated rendition of the main consequences of this definition, mostly because of my lack of expertise. Because God is *ipsum esse*, or ‘being itself’, all other existent things derive their existence from God in whom they find their ultimate reality and meaning. According to the Thomistic view, it would be wrong to speak of God as ‘a being’, and far more appropriate to call him simply ‘to be’, which means that God is not the highest entity in the rank of being, but being itself. All that is, is, because it participates in God, who is being itself and bestows being upon beings. However, God is not just ‘being itself’ or ‘to be’, as if He only facilitated the being of other existents. He is ‘being itself *subsistens*’, that is: being itself as ‘the sheer act of existence itself’. In God there is no difference between essence and existence, opposed to other beings, whose essence differs from their existence, which means that God is at once being that allows other existents to be, and being in the act of existence. He is not just ‘being’ in the bleak and unspecified sense of *esse commune*, which denotes the most general characteristic common to all beings and things that are. God is pure, rich and fully developed being itself in the act of existence. To put it simply, God is both being that provides being for other beings and He is being itself, existing in and through Himself in a rich, fulfilled and completely actualised way. As such, God is both transcendent from creatures and immanent in creation.

From the outset these notions offer a perspective that is very unlike the common Protestant view. According to the Thomistic view, there is no radical gap or chasm between God and the world because all that is, exists because it participates in God. As a consequence, all that is, is good, to the extent that it is. Of course, it may adopt bad qualities and evil properties, but as far as it *is*, it is good because it derives its being qua being from God, who is being itself. In Protestant theologies the division between the creator and creature is usually held to be more fundamental than Thomistic theologies can permit and fallen creatures are deemed to be less valuable, because they are ‘incapable of doing any good and inclined to all wickedness’, as the Heidelberg Catechism puts it. Opposed to Protestant theologies, Thomistic or Roman Catholic theologies focus on Being itself and beings, which are not first and foremost about Word, narrative or story, but about beings related to and connected with Being itself. According to Protestant metaphysics, God is ‘a being’ independent of the world, separated from his creatures in sovereign autonomy, communicating Himself by His Word. According to Thomistic views He is Being in which beings participate.

The history of Thomistic philosophy is extensive and in the twentieth century Thomism engaged with various philosophical movements. Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, for example, belonged to the most important

interpreters of Aquinas’ thought and were counted among existential Thomists. Joseph Maréchal, Bernhard Lonergan and Karl Rahner tried to connect Thomism with Cartesian subjectivism and Kantian epistemology. These innovations are important for the understanding of Thomistic influences on Borgman’s theology. To clarify this statement, I will briefly refer to Rahner and Schillebeeckx, who took Thomistic theology as their starting point, modernised their theologies in relationship with the developments of Vaticanum II and influenced Borgman.

Rahner redefined the relation between nature and grace in such a way that human beings are oriented towards transcendence from the outset, because of a primordial grace. Nature, therefore, never appears as such, but only as formed by grace. Because human nature is informed by grace, human beings are related to transcendence, which at once enables and conditions their ‘categorical’ (or empirical) experiences. This intricate conception implies that human existence itself is a kind of grace, which is why grace is not limited to the forgiveness of sins or eventually of original sin. Existence itself is an act of grace and a gift in which God communicates himself and makes human beings reach beyond themselves towards transcendence. To put it simply and straightforwardly: human beings are never unrelated to God, whether they know it or not (Rahner 1963:86, 1976:124–128).

Like Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx started as a neo-Thomistic theologian, but turned towards the elaboration of a theology of culture and ultimately made a hermeneutic turn, in which he accentuated the crucial role of experience in faith and theology (Boeve 2004:199–201; Borgman 1999). Lived experiences were crucial to Schillebeeckx and in this context he introduced the important category of ‘negative contrast-experience’. To put it briefly, negative contrast-experiences show that experiences of evil, pain, sorrow and suffering still connect human beings with God because they immediately illuminate what is opposed to the flourishing of human life and in this way show by contrast what the salvation is meant to be that Christians talk about as God’s salvation (McManus 1999). Now it seems to me that even after his hermeneutical turn, Schillebeeckx’s theology still continued to be informed by a Thomistic pattern of thought. Obviously, he does not expand on metaphysical presuppositions or timeless dogmatic truths, because of his focus on the role of experience. In fact, he even challenged an important part of Thomistic theology by claiming that God is not the necessary condition of human being and human subjectivity. Instead, God is the supreme luxury of their life, not their cause or goal, which would reduce Him to a ‘stop-gap’ (Godzieba 2010:26). Yet, Schillebeeckx still supposes that human beings are never unrelated to God, which is precisely what the negative contrast-experience shows, and in this respect he remains within the paradigm of Thomistic theology.

Like Schillebeeckx, Borgman is engaged with a cultural theology. In his important work *Metamorfosen. Over religie en moderne cultuur* (Borgman 2006) as well as in his earlier work

*Alexamenos aanbidt zijn God* (Borgman 1994) he posits himself within the tradition of Thomistic theology and in close relationship with Schillebeeckx. In this line of thought he tries to find traces of God in our confusing and fragmented world by means of an 'essayistic theology', under the presumption that God is the source and goal of all that is who keeps it into being (Borgman 2006:19–20). Traces of God, who is the source of all being, can and should be present in our postmodern situation, in which society, culture and religion have radically changed and continue to do so. Nowadays, it is urgent to show in what way these traces can be recognised or realised. To start with religion, Borgman states that it is concerned with giving shape to both our respect for the sacred and our obedience to it. As such, religion is of great importance to culture because culture ultimately also ought to be a way of obedience to the sacred. Now that our culture in its own perception seems to have ceased all links with religion, the religious task is to search for actual or possible shapes of 'religion after religion', which means that we have to search for new ways in which a connection with the sacred actually still gets shaped or otherwise might get shaped (Borgman 2006:32). In order to find the hidden connections of postmodern culture with the sacred, Borgman perceptively and sensitively reflects on a wide variety of phenomena like social developments, politics, movies, literature and the like. The depth and scope of his cultural analyses surely qualify his theology.

Borgman's analyses are conducted on the basis of the following conviction, which is fundamental to his theology:

Something is recognised in the good, the meaningful and the compassionate, in the horror elicited by evil, meaninglessness and indifference, and in our longing for a situation in which the reality of which we are a part speaks of goodness, meaningfulness and compassion in all its dimensions and with complete clarity. That it is God, who is known in this, and not an illusionary product of our own desire cannot be proven rationally. It is confessed in faith when Christian traditions call God 'creator' and perceive the nearness of His compassion in all that befalls human beings. (Boeve 2010:4; Borgman 2006:92)

In our postmodern experiences, therefore, fragmented, diffuse and disparate as they may be, we are still related to something, which is identified as God by Christian faith. The negative contrast-experiences are of great help to bring the relationship to light. The search for these relationships is ultimately informed by the presupposition of Thomistic theology that human beings are always related to God because beings participate in Being itself and vice versa. From this Thomistic or Roman Catholic background it makes perfect sense that Borgman refuses to label himself as a liberal theologian. He holds on to his orthodox frame of interpretation in order to interpret (post)modern phenomena liberally.

## Convergence of liberal Protestant and progressive Roman Catholic theologies

Let me briefly summarise my findings up till now. Borgman offers a rich and valuable cultural theology, in which he

fathoms our present social and cultural life on the presupposition that modern or postmodern human beings are related to God, even if they are not aware of it themselves. Their experiences of hope, meaningfulness, horror and evil testify of a desire for a fulfilled life, which in Christian faith is considered as a desire for God, who is fulfilled being Himself, to whom humans are always related already, even by way of negative contrast, as their experiences show. This relationship can be accounted for on the basis of a Thomistic theological pattern of thought, which assumes that God is immanent in the world and human beings derive their being from God who is Being itself. To Protestants, this approach does not fully match with the prevailing attitude handed over by their tradition. Protestants are focused on Scripture, narrative and Word as the means by which God communicates with human beings. The relationship between God and humans is not seen as one of ontological participation nor expressed in terms of 'being', which is because of a different metaphysical outlook that crept into Protestant theology in spite of its concentration on Scripture alone that can ultimately be traced back to Duns Scotus. This outlook entails the conception of God and humans as different beings within the realm of univocal being, which gave rise to the conception of humans as independent beings.

The relationship between Borgman's progressive Roman Catholic theology and liberal Protestant theology is surely stamped by their various Thomistic and Protestant points of departure. Yet, their familiarities and differences are more complicated than just this. A liberal Protestant theology accentuates the life of faith of the individual person and finds its sources in the interior of the human spirit. It seems likely that this raised Borgman's suspicion and made him think that a liberal Protestant theology is both individualistic and subjective. Contrariwise, liberal Protestants may fear that Borgman identifies the desire for a fulfilled life too easily as a desire for God, that the ontological relationship between God and humans implies too much metaphysics and that the blossoming of human life will ultimately be annexed as a Roman Catholic way of life, either anonymous or full-blown. In this respect differences are huge. Liberal Protestantism actually is a product of what is called 'the turn to the subject' in philosophy and theology, just like progressive Roman Catholic theology is reminiscent of a more encompassing structure of being that transcends the subject. So their differences are for real. In another respect, however, there are remarkable and close familiarities.

As I explained above, liberal Protestant theologians were in need of a new foundation of the religious life next to their critical scholarly work. The philosophies of Kant, Schleiermacher and Hegel helped them to relate human spirits to God, from where they contain what is transmitted to them. Humans relate to God by their inner obligation, their awareness of dependency or their relation to Spirit. In this way, human religiosity does not depend on contingent confessional traditions, nor on particular experiences of a certain kind or arbitrary perspectives on the world. Religiosity

is founded in the structure of the human mind. 'God' is the reference to what our spirit contains beyond what is only ours. The religious life, therefore, is more or less detached from its historical religious tradition. Of course, tradition shaped religiosity and culture in various ways, but religion is essentially concerned with a more universal and personal relation of the human mind to what lies beyond it and manifests itself within it. Now this relationship between the human spirit and what lies beyond it, but manifests itself within it, is very similar to the relationship between human beings and Being itself in Thomistic theology. Human beings always refer to Being itself, which lies beyond them and manifests itself in them. Clearly, there are differences between spirit and being, but the structural familiarity is obvious.

It will be clarifying to mention Heidegger at this point where the familiarity between liberal Protestant and Roman Catholic theologies is noticed because his philosophy enhanced their convergence. Basically, Heidegger claimed that human understanding, consciousness or spirit is firmly situated because human being is being-in-the-world. Spirit belongs to being and human consciousness is always already determined by its worldly surroundings in a web of meaning prior to its own thinking and examining (Porter & Robinson 2011:57–71). A quest for Being, therefore, should start with our being-in-the-world and ask which Being reveals itself in our being-in-the-world. We fail to find an adequate answer if we only study the being of objects from a distance. We also fail to find an answer if we understand Being as something *subsistens*. Being rather is a hidden and unknown no-thing, which manifests itself in beings. Heidegger thus confronted both liberal Protestant and Roman Catholic theologies. Because spirit is grounded in being, liberal Protestants were called for a correction of their focus on spirit and consciousness. On the other hand, because Being is not accessible to metaphysical knowledge, but rather happens in the events of its occurrence, progressive Roman Catholics turned from metaphysics to hermeneutics in order to interpret Being and beings. In this way, liberal Protestant theologians turned to the wider perspective of being instead of spirit, and Roman Catholic theologians turned to anthropology instead of metaphysics. Their theologies thereby converged.

This convergence shows itself in Tillich and Bultmann, who both rely on Heidegger to a certain extent. Bultmann wrote an important essay, *The Problem of Hermeneutics*, in which he defended against Karl Barth that human beings have some pre-understanding of God prior to His revelation in Scripture:

In human life an existential knowledge of God is present, which presents itself as the quest for happiness, for salvation, for meaning in the world and in history, as the quest for authenticity of one's own being. (Bultmann 1950:231–232)

Tillich discussed the idea that *Deus est esse* in an article of fundamental importance for his theology of culture, *The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion*, in which he mentioned Augustine, Aquinas and Scotus. In this article Tillich develops his thesis that 'God' is a symbol of the unconditional, which

is the power of being. He claims that 'the Unconditioned of which we have an immediate awareness, without inference, can be recognised in the cultural and natural universe' (Tillich 1959:26). These short remarks and quotations show that both Bultmann and Tillich (1) shift from spirit to being and (2) are remarkably close to Borgman's fundamental conviction quoted above that 'something is recognised ...'. Schillebeeckx, who shifted his interests from being to experience, discussed Bultmann and Tillich intensively and critically and thereby shows the convergence of liberal Protestant and progressive Roman Catholic theologies from the Catholic side.

## Postmodern questions

The convergence, which was greatly enhanced by Heidegger's philosophy, simultaneously poses serious questions to both a liberal Protestant and a progressive Roman Catholic theology and confronts them with the questions we now label as 'postmodern'. Postmodern philosophy both sharply criticises the subject and its consciousness or self-consciousness as a starting point for our reflections (which seriously affects liberal Protestant theology) and refutes metaphysical or onto-theological ideas that impose a unity on the various phenomena of the world (which seriously challenges a Roman Catholic theology).

The issue of postmodern philosophers like Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard is tellingly summarised in an illuminating passage from Merold Westphal:

'... western metaphysics has regularly resorted to the notion of an ultimate origin to be the foundation of everything or an ultimate goal to be the harmonisation of everything, or, typically, both. But there is no pure origin, divine (creator) or human (*cogito*); the only beginnings we can find are relative beginnings, themselves grounded in that which precedes them. Nor is there any goal by which experience or reality can be, to use the official term, totalised. All such ends represent the wishful thinking of finite parts to be the whole, the effort of centers of force that can see that they are not the *arche* or the *telos*. The epistemological foundationalism of which Descartes is the paradigm and the eschatological holism of which Hegel and Marx are the paradigms are so riddled with paradox and paralogism that we must eschew the comfort they provide and accept our ultimate homelessness' (Westphal 2008:9–10)

This delineation of postmodern thought clearly shows in what ways both a liberal Protestant theology and Borgman's progressive Roman Catholic theology can be contested. I will confine myself to the case of Borgman, as the objections raised against his theology also apply to liberal Protestants like Bultmann and Tillich.

Borgman supposes 'that something is recognised' in our experiences and in our longing for fulfilment that can be identified as God by Christian faith. 'That it is God, who is known in this, and not an illusionary product of our own desire cannot be proven rationally. It is confessed in faith when Christian traditions call God "creator" and perceive the nearness of His compassion in all that befalls human beings'. Obviously, postmodern philosophy actually would



call Borgman's 'something' which is recognised an illusion. Or rather, they would claim that it cannot be identified. In identifying 'something' as the God of Christian faith, a particular Christian perspective is imposed on a plurality of disparate experiences, which may be acceptable within the Christian community, but it has no meaning outside of this community. Besides, from his particular perspective Borgman still intimates an *arche* and a *telos* of our being and thereby sticks to a metaphysical point of view, which ultimately totalises reality.

In an article on the significance of Schillebeeckx's theology, Lieven Boeve pointed out that he and Erik Borgman developed their teacher's theology in rather divergent directions. According to Boeve, this divergence reveals a certain ambiguity in the theology of Schillebeeckx, who tried to discern God in the world and in history on the basis of the Christian tradition. Borgman still tries to find traces of God in the world, whereas Boeve emphasises that to be a Christian 'implies an identity construction rooted in particular narratives and practices, with its own specific truth claims in a context of dynamic plurality and often-conflicting truth claims' (Boeve 2010:7). Now these remarks are very clarifying. Postmodernism forced Boeve to accept the particularity of the Christian tradition, which is always interrupted and reconstructed, but cannot be universalised in a world of plurality. Borgman, on the other hand, maintains that even under postmodern conditions humans still relate to what Christians call 'God'.

To my mind, this stand by Borgman does not mean that Borgman universalises a particular perspective in an unwarranted way. Boeve confines himself to the particular Christian tradition. Borgman, on the other hand, tries to show that the Christian tradition is meaningful beyond its own particularity. Just as liberal Protestant theology maintained that religiosity does not depend on contingent confessional traditions, as it is founded in the structure of the human mind, Borgman shows that even under postmodern conditions our experiences and longings point to what Christians call God. A Christian perspective, therefore, is helpful to interpret cultural and social phenomena and to clarify what is going on in them. In this way, both a liberal Protestant theology and Borgman's progressive Roman Catholic theology try to detect or even enable a religion after religion. Both the theologies identify religious motives, interests and shapes to a culture that left the institutionalised religion behind and ceased all links with tradition. The identification of implicit religious motives in cultural and social phenomena is not intended to be an annexation of culture, but a contribution to culture, in order that it may orient itself to what it may recognise as sacred itself.

## Conclusion

Finally, I think that liberal Protestants should appreciate Borgman's theology for its reflections on culture and society, which are close to their own approach. I spent some

efforts to disclose and clarify the different origins of a progressive Roman Catholic theology and a liberal Protestant theology. I also referred to their convergence and the postmodern objections against them. I conclude with an articulation of their shared interest, which consists in the claim that the insights of a particular religion can be relevant beyond this tradition to modern and postmodern humans.

Admittedly, this shared interest is inherently problematic, for what should be the most important emphasis? Would liberal Protestants and progressive Roman Catholics ultimately be prepared to reduce their tradition to a source for religion after religion, or do they intend to reinforce their religion by showing its continuous and universal relevance? Probably, both alternatives may be preferred by various groups and individuals. Ultimately, I think, Borgman chooses neither option because he is interested first and foremost in the relevance of his particular tradition for a broader audience beyond that tradition and because it helps to reflect on our present cultural situation. This position may be inherently problematic and unstable, but it is not futile, as the recognition of his cultural theology shows.

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